

Brown Girl Project

Preliminary Thematic Report

Emerging themes from pilot-informed qualitative engagement with women of color

Phase I | Independent Research | 2026
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Why this report exists

This report documents early themes emerging from pilot group conversations with women of color. It does not present conclusions or claims, but serves as an initial step in an ongoing qualitative inquiry designed to listen before defining outcomes.

FROM PILOT INSIGHTS TO ONGOING INQUIRY

The themes outlined in this report surfaced during early group conversations with participants. While not exhaustive or representative, the repetition of these reflections across conversations indicated shared pressures and experiences that warrant further exploration.

This phase builds on those initial insights through facilitated group conversations designed to deepen understanding as themes continue to evolve.

Why this research?

These early observations highlighted the need for a dedicated space to listen more carefully before defining research questions, outcomes, or interventions.

Brown Girl Project emerged from early qualitative conversations that revealed recurring tensions around identity, belonging, adaptation, and inherited responsibility among women of color.

Existing research on women of color is often fragmented across academic discipli-

nes or filtered through institutional priorities. As a result, lived experience is frequently examined in parts rather than as a whole.

This preliminary thematic report reflects insights from initial group conversations conducted as part of an exploratory research phase.

Rather than advancing fixed arguments, it documents emerging patterns that inform ongoing inquiry.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

How This Work Is Being Conducted...

Facilitated Group



Conversations & small, guided conversations held online.

Audio Recording



Sessions were audio-recorded for thematic analysis.

Voluntary Participation



Participation was optional, with informed consent.

Exploratory Approach



Themes were identified iteratively across conversations.

WHAT BEGAN TO EMERGE

From the Pilot Project

Across early conversations, several themes surfaced repeatedly as participants reflected on personal and collective experiences.

While individual stories differ, the recurrence of these patterns highlights shared tensions shaping how women of color navigate identity, pressure, visibility, and belonging across social and structural contexts.

These conversations bring visibility to experiences that are often normalized, minimized, or held privately.

Emerging Themes

Theme 1: Identity Negotiation & Conditional Belonging

Participants frequently described navigating different versions of themselves across cultural, social, and professional spaces. Many reflected on adjusting behavior, language, or presentation in order to feel accepted or understood, often expressing a sense of being “in between” identities. This negotiation was not framed as optional, but as a condition for belonging in spaces shaped by dominant cultural norms.

Theme 2: Inherited Responsibility & Expectation

Reflections consistently highlighted feelings of responsibility tied to family history, migration, and cultural expectation. Participants spoke about pressure to succeed, represent, or carry more than themselves, shaping decisions around work, relationships, and self-worth. These expectations were experienced as both motivating and burdensome, revealing emotional weight carried across generations.

Emerging Themes

Theme 3: Adaptation as Survival

Adaptation emerged less as a personal choice and more as a survival strategy. Participants described emotional self-monitoring, code-switching, and strategic silence as ways of navigating environments perceived as unsafe or unwelcoming. Rather than resilience alone, these practices reflected responses to structural and interpersonal constraints.

Theme 4: Cultural Pride, Attachment, & Complexity

Alongside discussions of pressure and harm, participants expressed a strong attachment to cultural identity. Pride, joy, and community connection were described as sources of grounding, even when accompanied by tension or conflict. This theme complicates purely deficit-based narratives, highlighting culture as both a site of strength and complexity.

Why these themes matter?

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Together, these themes reflect shared pressures shaping how women of color move through daily life.

Rather than isolated experiences, they point to broader social and structural conditions that influence identity formation, belonging, and self-expression.

Understanding these patterns creates space not only for reflection, but for future dialogue, collaboration, and applied learning.

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Scope & limitations

This report reflects an early exploratory phase and is not intended to be representative or exhaustive.

- Small sample size
- Voluntary participation
- Themes are evolving
- Insights are pilot-informed

These findings should be understood as directional rather than definitive.

LOOKING AHEAD...

These preliminary themes inform the ongoing exploratory phase of Brown Girl Project. Future stages of this work will refine areas of focus, deepen thematic inquiry, and determine which findings warrant broader public-facing outputs.

The purpose of this project is not only to surface shared experiences, but to create space for reflection, connection, and collective understanding.

By centering the voices of women of color, Brown Girl Project aims to foster dialogue across difference, support collective sense-making, and explore how research can be returned to communities in meaningful and accessible ways.